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THE RELIGION OF DR. RABINDRANATH TAGORE

“The truth of religion is hidden in the caves;

That’s the path a great man followed.” (The Mahabharath)

1. INTRODUCTION

It has been said that man is “incorrigibly religious” and it has to be admitted that the Easterners are so to a degree. DR. RABINDRANATH TAGORE, while he lived, had the enviable distinction of being called “the completest living human being” and “the brightest star in the Eastern sky”. His religion must, therefore, be a matter of great moment and curiosity.

The religion of the vast majority of mankind is determined by the historical accident of birth and position in life—religion is an heir-loom and a legacy with them. But the religion of really great men cannot be adequately expressed through the appellation of any historical religious denomination. There is something arrestingly novel and peculiar about these men that cannot be comprehended within the four corners of any particular creed or dogma. Rabindranath was born, lived and died, within the fold of Brahmo Samaj, a reformed branch of Hinduism; he even sometimes strove for the reform and spread of the Samaj with the militant persuasiveness of a zealous missionary. But to say that Brahmo Samaj Hinduism was his religion is to do an injustice to the memory of the departed great. Rabindranath is one of the greatest representatives of human culture at its

highest and best and his religion is the "Religion of Man"—the religion that will survive the crash of religions.

2. THE CONFLICT OF OPINIONS ABOUT RABINDRANATH'S RELIGION.

The problem of determination of the religion of Rabindranath acquires additional interest and significance in view of the fact that eminent persons, who enjoyed the opportunity to know him from close quarters, are not unanimous on this topic. "From the words of the poet men take what meaning please them". Rev. Mr. Saunders, Rev. Mr. Urquhart, Mr. E. J. Thompson and the like discover a strong Christian influence in his works. "What is best in *Gitanjali*", writes Mr. Thompson, "is an anthology from ages of Indian thought and brooding; but it is the sun of Christian influence that has brought these buds into flowers.....The man who hence forward must rank among the greatest religious poets of the world did not call himself Christian, and only sheer ignorance of him and of Christianity could claim him as Christian; but in him was given a glimpse of what the Christianity of India will be like and we see that it will be something better than the Christianity which came into it".¹ Dr. Sir Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan joins battle with Mr. Thompson and declares that "Rabindranath's religion is identical with the ancient wisdom of the Upanishads, the Bhagavath Gita and theistic systems of a later day". "Our conclusion is" he writes further, "that in his '*Sadhana*' and other works, Rabindranath, by his power of imagination, has breathed life into the dry bones of the ancient religion of India and made it live. His teaching is

1. Rabindranath Tagore: His Life and Work, page 101.

in no sense a mere borrowed product of Christianity; indeed it goes deeper in certain fundamental aspects than Christianity as represented to us in the West. And if Rabindranath's religion is something 'better than the Christianity which came into it', it only shows that the ancient religion of India has not much to gain from Western Christianity".¹ Mr. Thompson and others of the same school of thought base their argument mostly on *Gitanjali* which certainly contains ideas and notions that atleast partly justify their contention. Dr. Radhakrishnan takes into consideration such philosophical works as 'Sadhana' and 'Personality' together with 'Gitanjali' and claims Rabindranath as a Vedantin on a theistic interpretation of the Vedanta Philosophy. Strains and influences of all religions that have at one time or other claimed the allegiance of man may be found in his work but no such religion can adequately express what was the religion of Rabindranath Tagore. It is not the religion of a Christian saint or mystic nor that of a Vedantic Sadhak. It is the religion of an artist and Rabindranath is the artist par excellence.

3. THE PLACE OF ART IN THE MORPHOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF MAN'S SPIRITUAL LIFE.

The major spiritual activities of man that suggest cosmologies and are influenced by them are Ethics, Religion, Science and Aesthetics. The motor force behind moral activities is the awareness of man's imperfections in comparison with the ideal of moral excellence and perfection and so there is a perpetual striving of man to overcome the discrepancy between the real and the ideal. Moral life is a life of effort and endeavour to realise and enjoy the Good. The

1. The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore page, 118.

existence and actuality of evils and imperfections serve as a goad and incentive to such a realisation. But Religion demands that its God should be Omnipotent and All—perfect and so the greatest crux of the religious Weltanschauung is the undeniable existence of evils. Either evils are to be explained or explained away and Morality declared a branch of religion or the existence of evils has to be boldly admitted and the God of Religion declared a finite being. This antithesis between Morality and Religion apparently redounds to the discredit of both and the spirit of man has to ponder. In Science the ideal of the True is pursued with a dispassionate objectivity of attitude, unruffled by the obtrusion of human hopes and fears. The world of science is, to use a celebrated phrase of Professor A. N. Whitehead's, "a dull affair, soundless, scentless, colourless; merely the hurrying of material endlessly, meaninglessly". But this exclusion of human values from the scientific scheme issues in a sharp contrast between Fact and Value. The point is vividly expressed by Lord Bertrand Russell in his essay on the 'Free Man's Worship'. The actual world is there apostrophized as "Omnipotent matter, blind to good and evil, reckless of human life and human ideals," and the author exhorts us "to abandon the struggle for private happiness, to expel all eagerness for temporary desire, to burn with passion for eternal things" and adds "This is emancipation, this is Free Man's Worship".¹ This sharp antithesis between Science and Religion, defined as a faith in the conservation of all values, represents the greatest spiritual crisis of modern life, the solution of which is the desideratum of philosophy. It is a hopeful sign that the creative nisus of contemporary thought is moving in the direction of a satisfactory synthesis.

1. Philosophical Essays, page 68.

Aesthetics is the science of the Beautiful. In the world-view of the Artist there is no antithesis and discord between Fact and Value, Nature and Man, the Real and the Ideal. The attitude of the artist to the universe is not one of aggressive appropriation and control or of indifference of baffled desire—it is one of receptivity, of acceptance and acquiescence. The poet lies reclined on the shore in expectation of the “murmurs and scents of the infinite sea” and the “murmurs and scents”, the sights and sounds of Nature ignite his soul to incandescent beauty and in such rare moments the ever-thirsty human soul is vouchsafed a vision of the Beautiful, as a result of which she becomes the receptacle of unwonted joy and beatitude. But such revelations are short-lived and evanescent, but the desire and capacity of man for joy is unlimited. So in the face of the revelations the soul of man feels, too, an agonizing sense of despair the voice of which is heard in Faust’s pathetic cry:

‘Verweile doch, du bist so schön’ (GOETHE)

i. e. ‘Ah, still delay, thou art so fair.’ The result is that in the artistic activity of man we find an ardent desire to eternalize the transient, to catch and imprison the elusive in the mesh of matter and form—artistic creations are “moments made into eternity”: they are, in the words of Keats, “a joy for ever”. In short, Art is born in the passionate endeavour of man to make the enjoyment of the Beautiful a permanent possibility in his life.

In a higher plane of spiritual life there is no clash among the ideals to which mankind owes allegiance and tries to realize. The soul of man is composed of

the triple faculties of reason, will and emotion and these have as their objects the ideals of the true, the good and the beautiful. Religion may be defined as an attitude to the universe and its essence is found in a spirit of worshipfulness i. e. acceptance of, and love and devotion for, its Object. The God of Religion is worshipped as the Spirit of Beauty by the artist. Shelley procured his rustication from the Oxford University by the publication of his booklet on 'The Necessity of Atheism', but it betrays naivete and narrowness of mind to assert that the poet of 'The Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' had no religion. He had and it is the religion of an artist—it is the poet's religion. The religion of the poet holds a chance for the resolution of the antithesis between the material universe and the world of human values, for poetry is, as Wordsworth defines it, "the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge" and "the impassioned expression which is the countenance of all science". The poet may be also a teacher and he teaches to attain by "shadowing forth the unattainable". His appeal and exhortation is through the music of the written or uttered word—music the magic and incantation of which rouses the soul of man to an ecstatic vision of Reality in which man feels that his individual life chimes in unison with the heart-beat of the universe, for in and through both the One "spreads undivided and operates unspent": the One that is the Trinity of the True, the Good and the Beautiful—the Ekam that is also the Satyam, Sivam and Sundaram.

4. DR. TAGORE'S VIEWS ON ART AND RELIGION.

The last and most authoritative expression of Rabindranath's views on Art and Religion is contained in his article, "The Religion of an Artist",

in 'Contemporary Indian Philosophy' ¹ edited by Dr. S. Radhakrishnan and H. J. Muir, "My religion is essentially a poet's religion," he declares emphatically. Proceeding further he says, "I have already said that my religion is a poet's religion! All that I feel about it, is from Vision and not from knowledge. I frankly say that I cannot satisfactorily answer questions about the problem of evil or about what happens after death. And yet I am sure that there have come moments when my soul has touched the infinite and has become intensely conscious of it through the illumination of joy." ² His attitude to the universe is one of peace and joy and bliss. "The feeling which I always had," writes Rabindranath, "was a deep satisfaction of personality that flowed into my nature through living channels of communication from all sides:" ³ He has no quarrell with himself and with the world. He concludes one of his poems with a note of amazing self-complacence: "What ever I have been, I have been blessed, and blessed is my world". The universe to him is not the scene of the operation of meaningless and hostile forces where the soul of man is an unheeded stranger. It is always bathed in, and suffused with, beauty divine and its communications to him forces a 'birth in beauty' upon his soul. "I believe", says Rabindranath, "that the vision of Paradise is to be seen in the sunlight and green of the earth, in the beauty of the human face and the wealth of human life, even in objects that are seemingly insignificant and unprepossessing. Everywhere in this earth the spirit of Paradise is awake and sending forth its voice. It reaches our inner ear without our knowing it. It tunes our harp of life which sends our aspirations in music beyond the finite, not only in prayers and hopes but also in temples which are

1. Cont. Ind. Philo.

2. Ibid page 34.

3. Ibid page 33.

flames of fire in stone, in pictures which are dreams everlasting, in the dance which is ecstatic meditation in the still centre of movement.”¹ The whole tone of the life of the poet is one of peace, contentment and bliss. Before the rise of the Prophet of Shantiniketan the East did not for a long time hear such gladsome tidings as we find in his life and work, which is, as it were, a protest against that cramping fatalism and pessimism which are the brooding spirit of oriental life and thought. But his optimism is not the optimism born of the satisfied vanity of the successful man, of the utilitarian and the pragmatic—a mood that is best expressed by Robert Browning’s utterance :

GOD’S IN HIS HEAVEN.

All’s right with the world (Pippa Passes)
It is the optimism of the sublime poet who is at peace with himself and with the universe. There is nothing sorrowful in the scheme of things to the poet. Even Death, the greatest of evils, is the veiled beloved that comes and woos the human soul and plays ‘*ludus amoris*’ with her. All evils, all ugliness and discord vanish when viewed ‘*Sub specie æternitatis*’. The poet is a pilgrim in search of beauty; to him the platitude of the common-place is varnished with a light that is not of this earth. In his artistic moods the votarist of art feels the heart-beat of the abounding world in his soul and in consequence he is at home with everything.

Art represents a great adventure of the spirit of man in the discovery of rhythm and principle of unity in the universe. The religious activity of man

1. Ibid, Page 45-46.

moves in co-operation with the artistic. One of the aims of religion is to help the individual in the supreme task of achievement of his personality and the consciousness of form and unity in the manifold and chaotic mass of our impressions and emotions is the hall-mark of such an achievement. We intimately and immediately feel ourselves as persons. "The fact that I exist", writes Rabindranath, "has its truth in the fact that everything else does exist, and the "I am" in me crosses its finitude wherever it deeply realises itself in the "Thou art". This crossing of the limit produces joy, the joy that we have in beauty, in love, in greatness. Self-forgetting, and in a higher degree, self-sacrifice, is our acknowledgement of this our experience of the infinite. This is the philosophy which explains our joy in arts, the arts that in their creations intensify the sense of the unity which is the unity of truth we carry within ourselves. The personality in me is a self-conscious principle of living unity; it at once comprehends and yet transcends all the details of facts that are individually mine, my knowledge, feeling, wish and will, my memory, my hope, my love, my activities, and all my belongings. This personality which has the sense of the One in its nature realises it in things, thoughts and facts made into units, the principle of unity, which it contains is more or less perfectly satisfied in a beautiful face or a picture, a poem, a song, a character or a harmony of inter-related ideas or facts and then for it these things become intensely real and therefore joyful. Its standard of reality, the reality that has its perfect revelation in a perfection of harmony is hurt when there is a consciousness of discord, because discord is against the fundamental unity which is at its centre".¹ Elsewhere he writes

1. Ibid page 36-37.

about this subjective theory of art thus: "This world whose soul seems to be aching for expression in its endless rhythm of lines and colours, music and movements, hints and whispers, and all the suggestion of the inexpressible, finds its harmony in the ceaseless longing of the human heart to make the Person manifest in its own creations".¹ Rhythm is the creative force in the hands of the artist and rhythm is movement generated and regulated by harmonious restriction. So long as words remain in uncadenced prose form, they do not give any lasting feeling of reality, but the moment they are taken up and put into rhythm they vibrate into radiance. In perfect rhythm, the art-form becomes like the stars, which in their seeming stillness are never still, like a motionless flame that is nothing but movement. A great picture is always speaking, but news from a newspaper, even of some tragic happening, is still born. Art has the magic wand which gives undying reality to all things it touches and relates them to the personal being in us. Any form of artistic creation means that through it some impendable abstractions had a concrete unity in relation to us. Its substance can be analysed, but not this unity, which is in its self-introduction. No one knows how it exceeds all its parts, transcends all its laws and communicates with the person. The significance which is in unity is an eternal wonder, like the feeling in a beautiful face of a smile that is inscrutable, elusive and profoundly satisfactory—it is simply a matter of incalculable possibilities.

To Rabindranath, the great poet-artist, Art is the window to reality and the Vision Beautiful surrounds him with a nimbus of glory and effulgence. The Upanishadic doctrine that Brahma is boundless

in his superfluity which inevitably finds its expression in the external world process, explains the genesis of creation and also of Art. In art man overflows and measures himself with the infinite. In our consciousness of ourselves as persons we transcend the limitation and finitude of our mortal nature. This is real life, which is an incessant explosion of freedom. "Art reveals man's wealth of life, which seeks its freedom in forms of perfection which are an end in themselves"

The central concept of Rabindranath's philosophy of art is that of personality. "Limitation of the unlimited is personality: god is personal where he creates". The reality of the world is in its relation to the person. Things are distinct not in their essence but in their appearance i.e., in their relation to us to whom they appear. This is art the truth of which is not in substance or logic but in expression. Abstract truth may belong to Science and Metaphysics but the world of reality belongs to Art. "The world as an art is the play of the Supreme Person revelling in image making." He is the great artist, the Mayavin. The ingredients of the picture elude and do not reveal the eternal secret of appearance; their evasiveness is apparent through their constant flight in kaleidoscopic changes. Artists as persons long to create a semblance of permanence amid the scene of flux and change. This is all illusion—it is maya. But the game of maya is supremely liberating, satisfactory and blissful and that is what matters.

The religion of Rabindranath is the religion of an artist, and true to his convictions, he holds that in and through art the destiny of man will have to be realized. The tenets of his religion are freedom, joy

and peace—a joyous sense of blissful existence. His indictment of modern civilization and his exhortation, through the artists, to humanity at large, are based on his religion. His plea for “the freedom of the inner spirit” as opposed to the mechanism of modern civilization with its apotheosis of external forces and material foundations, is sincere and certain. “When an organisation which is a machine,” he writes “becomes a central force, political, commercial, educational or religious, it obstructs the free flow of the inner life of the people and waylays and exploits it for the augmentation of its own power. Today, such concentration of power is fast multiplying in the outside and the cry of the oppressed spirit of man is in the air which struggles to free itself from the grip of screws and bolts of unmeaning obsessions.”¹ The movement of modern life is impeded by insistent purpose, crowded thoughts and things that have become too difficult for a harmonious assimilation. It is evident that modern age is more mindful of acquisition of life’s equipment than the enjoyment of it. Life is made secondary to life’s materials like a garden buried under bricks gathered for the garden wall. “This world of men’s own manufacture,” he writes further in this connection, “with its discordant shrieks and swagger, impresses on him the scheme of a universe which has no touch of the person and therefore no ultimate significance. All the great civilisations that have become extinct must have come to their end through such wrong expression of humanity; through parasitism on a gigantic scale bred by wealth, by man’s clinging reliance on material resources; through a scoffing spirit of denial, of negation, robbing us of our means of sustenance in the path of Truth”. Freedom, peace & joy are the

1. Ibid, Page 28.

birth-rights of man & any policy that negates them or creates conditions that make their enjoyment difficult or impossible, stands condemned. Roused by his "graceless disillusionment" with regard to the British policy in India that has failed to prevent shocking sights of poverty & misery & also by the horrors of the World War No. II, the poet raised his oracular voice once again. "In the meanwhile the demon of barbarity has given up all pretence & has emerged with unconcealed fangs ready to tear up humanity in an orgy of devastation. From one end of the world to the other the poisonous fumes of hatred darken the atmosphere. The spirit of violence which perhaps lay dormant in the psychology of the west, has at last roused itself and desecrates the spirit of Man." (Crisis of Civilisation—Dr. Tagore's Address on the occasion of his 81st birth-day, 14th April, 1941, at Shantiniketan.) Unless there is a drastic revision of current values the civilisation of man is doomed. The darkness which will have to be destroyed is the egoism of the Nation & the light of the Infinite Personality will have to shine through the obstruction of this darkness. "My religion" writes Rabindranath "is the reconciliation in my own individual being of the Super-personal Man, the universal human spirit. This is the theme of my Hibbert Lectures". (Religion of Man') The revelation of the light of this Infinite personality of Man will have to be achieved not in single individuals but in one grand harmony of all human races.

It is in art that Rabindranath sees the hope of salvation. The artists are the evangelists for universal humanity. "It is for the artist to remind the world that with the truth of our expression we

grow in truth. When the man-made world is less an expression of man's creative soul than a mechanical device for some purpose of power, then it hardens itself, acquiring proficiency at the cost of subtle suggestiveness of living growth. In his creative activities man makes Nature instinct with his own life and love. But with his utilitarian energies he fights nature, banishes her from his world, deforms and defiles her with ugliness of his ambitions".¹ It is for the artist to proclaim his faith in the everlasting Yes—to say "I believe that there is an ideal power and permeating the earth an ideal of that Paradise which is not the outcome of fancy, but the ultimate reality in which all things dwell and move.' This is the essence of the poet's Decalogue to the world: his Testament to Humanity.

6. CONCLUSION: THE PROPHET OF THE FUTURE.

Mr. Thompson is right as and when he says that Rabindranath "must rank among the greatest religious poets of the world"; but his religion is not Christianity or Hinduism or any of the other religious 'isms' that divide among themselves the loyalty of the majority of mankind at present. His is the poet's religion, not of a moral or religious preacher. Dr. S. N. Dasgupta in his book 'Rabi-Dipita' has pointed out that the chief characteristic of Rabindranath's work is '*Sreyā-bodh-bihinata*' ie lack of a sense of the Good and Dr. Tagore has accepted the interpretation in a letter to the learned author. (vide 'Prabasi', No. Bhadra, 1341 of the Bengali era). In that letter he writes "*Kintoo ami kavi, Sraayer urdhe take mani anandarupam amritam jadbibhati* ie. But poet am I and above the Good I acknowledge That which shines as the Idol of joy & bliss'.

Asceticism and renunciation is not agreeable to his temperament. One poem from his 'Gitanjali' largely illustrates this trait of his religion :—

“ Deliverance is not for me in renunciation. I feel the embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds of delight.

Thou ever pourest for me the fresh draught of thy wine of various colours and fragrance, filling this earthen vessel to the brim.

My world will light its hundred different lamps with thy flames and place them before the altar of thy temple.

No, I will never shut the doors of my senses. The delights of sight and hearing and touch will bear thy delight.

‘Yes, all my illusions will burn into illumination of joy and all my desires ripen into fruits of love.’

To be sure, this is the religion of the supreme aesthete—a religion the type of which we partly find in the Richard Jafferie's 'The Story of my Heart' and Sir Walter Pater's 'Marius the Epicurean.' In Dr. Tagore's work there is little of the Fall of Man and the consequent sense of guilt, of the programme of penance and renunciation, of the desperate desire to grasp this "Sorry Scheme of Things entire," of "troubled notes" and "sturm und drung," of "this strange disease of modern life, With its sick hurry, its divided aims, Its heads o'er-taxed, its palsied hearts". Of course in his manifold and versatile literary productions may be found moods that are akin to some of these characteristics. The God of Githnjali may be easily conceived of as the moral judge and governor of the world who gives out rewards and punishments in accordance with merit. The Victorian ideal of action, of adventure and experiment, that is so clearly expressed by the representative poet of the age, Lord Tennyson, in

such poems of his as 'Ulysses', 'The Voyage', 'Merlin and the Glean' etc., is to be found in a more idealised, and therefore more poetical, form in 'The Golden Boat'. But in 'Balaka—The Flight of Wild Cranes', admittedly the greatest of his books, the moral or religious preacher is conspicuous by his absence. The last-mentioned book is influenced by Henri Bergson's 'Creative Evolution.' The universe is represented as the perpetual flow of the E'lan Vital—a universe where what was is not and what will be is unpredictable, a world of 'ampler aether,' of unlimited possibilities of freedom and action, a romantic world and, therefore, a world that is eminently fit for the abode of the spirit of man. Hence-forward Rabindranath is only a singer, though not 'An idle singer of an empty day'. The poets are the singers of the eternal youth of man and the world and as a poet the Rishi of Shantiniketan is a close kinsman to the Rishis of the Rigveda who sang the Song of Creation when man was younger and the earth was greener.

Rabindranath is a prophet but he does not belong to the same category as Christ, Mohamed or Budha; his kindreds are Plato, Shelley, Keats, Maurice Maeterlinck and the like. The millennium for the advent of which the latter live and fight may be indefinitely delayed and disappointment may be correspondingly great, but hope springs eternal in human breast. Belief in perpetual advance in the path of the realisation of man's destiny is the backbone of his life and when moral excellence and ideal truth will become actualities in his life, the Good and the True will be gathered in, and find expression through, the Beautiful. The poets will become the "acknowledged"

legislators of the world and the life of man will be one chorus of hymn to God the Beautiful.

Rabindranath is a prophet for the future. He is not a Christian, Mahomedan or a Hindu, but he is the Christ, Mahomed and Budha of the age that is to be. When the "ape and tiger" in man will die, when love will be the universal law of life, when men's inner life will be a series of sanctified emotions and thoughts "inebriated with nectar" and his outer life an untrammelled enjoyment and worship of the Beautiful, our Poet-Prophet will have his fullest due. This may be a far cry, but our thankfulness and gratitude to the poet is great and immeasurable. Since the death of Plato no scion of the human family has done so much for the enlargement and beatification of the tradition of life as Dr. Rabindranath Tagore.

The completest living human being is dead : the brightest star in the Eastern sky has set on the banks of the Holy Ganges. The golden voice of the Poet-Laureate will be heard no more --- Death has put his seal of silence over it. But the golden voice was also a very "mighty voice" - --- it was the voice of the

"Prophetic soul of the wide world
Dreaming on things to come"

And let that voice ring through the whole gamut of our life and enrich it.

